

Building Connections, Creating Value

2016 State of the City Address by Derek Easterling

Good afternoon and thank you for that introduction! I would like to thank the KBA for allowing me to present the state of the city address as mayor of the great city of Kennesaw, sharing with you the city's success stories of 2015 and the vision for 2016.

It is truly my honor and pleasure to be here with you today.

It's evident by Kennesaw's growth and development over the past few years that we are good at building connections. In fact, there are very few people better in this category than former Mayor Mark Mathews, whose dedication, vision, and commitment got us here. He made good on his campaign slogan "building our hometown" which he used when he first ran for the city council 20 years ago. Under his direction, the city grew from a modest bedroom community to a vibrant, flourishing area for families, businesses, and visitors. Thank you, Mark, for your outstanding leadership. We look forward to your continued help and guidance as we continue to progress.

I would also like to recognize the outgoing members of the city council with us today whose enthusiasm and effort served the city well achieving the position it enjoys today ...

Tim Killingsworth

Doctor Cris Eaton-Welsh

And thank you to all the elected officials from other cities, Cobb County, and the state that are with us today.

As president of the KBA this year, Greg Carter has established his focus as building connections, creating value. I see a lot of parallels that can also apply to leading a city.

Building connections that create value is a process requiring many interconnected elements working together ... A type of synergy if you will.

For our purposes today, I will focus on four of them:

1. Maintaining financial stability
2. Growing our economy and encouraging development in a way that follows and meets our needs best
3. Ensuring our property values don't only stabilize, but increase for both neighborhoods and commercial properties, and
4. Protecting the public safety

Doing our jobs in these areas is the foundation of creating value for our community.

The city has made great progress in re-establishing a solid financial footing. Property values are improving which leads to improvement in our tax digest.

What stands out is that through good times and tough times, city leaders and staff were committed to delivering a consistently high level of service ... meeting challenges forcing some serious belt-tightening.

And yet, we've seen improvements every year. The development projects you see around town which are either completed or in progress will contribute to building the tax digest. And there are capital investments and expansions being made that aren't so obvious to the eye which are helping to grow our economy and add jobs as we speak.

As good stewards of your tax dollars, we will still be very conservative with our budget. We might not be able to see into the future, but we will prepare as best as we can for any outcome that should arise.

City employees understand the constraints of the budget and have been extremely patient. We look forward to being able to reward them with well-deserved raises in the near future. Additionally, the council recently took the step to reduce the vesting period for employee pensions from 10 years to five years. To achieve better balance, the vesting time for elected officials was raised. These actions bring us more in line with other municipalities and with Cobb County.

Even as federal laws and policies have made it more difficult, city management worked hard to offer staff an exceptional portfolio of healthcare benefits. A wellness program encouraging people to adopt healthy lifestyles is part of that program. It requires annual health screenings to make sure anyone who might be struggling is identified and assisted. Kennesaw continues to win awards as a healthy workplace and other municipalities contact us to find out how we do it.

And ... for those of you who are numbers people, and are interested in all the details of our city budget, we will make it easier for you. Finance Director Gina Auld and her team prepare a consolidated annual financial report each year which we post on our website. This year, we're also adding a simplified, more approachable "popular" annual financial report that will contain much of the same data but in a shorter, more user-friendly format. Look for both in March. And just in case you're interested in the day-to-day workings, we also post our check register. Financial transparency is very important to us.

2015 saw the culmination of many projects and it has been exciting to watch the Revival on Main project begin to transform our downtown into a city center where people can live, shop, work, and play. We are incredibly proud of Revival, and we are not the only ones; the Atlanta Regional Commission awarded the development its Livable Centers Initiative Achievement Award which recognizes projects that exemplify cutting-edge, livable design that enhance the surrounding community. The award validates the 10 years of diligent work and effort of numerous groups and individuals who never gave up on the dream of a vibrant downtown.

The Cobb Parkway Corridor ... here is another area with tremendous potential to create value for the city. Kennesaw marketplace, located at Cobb and Barrett Parkways, is a retail project by Fuqua Development which includes several dining, retail, and service businesses with anchors Whole Foods and Academy Sports; oh, and there is a 180-unit luxury senior housing development.

Although there has been much focus on new development, we also intend to work on planning, funding, and implementing re-development projects throughout the city that fit in with our strategic plans.

SPLOST has been an excellent vehicle to generate funding for road and facility improvement projects too expensive for any city to self-fund. We've done an excellent job of planning our strategies to partner with the county and state when they are making improvements so that we make the most of our funding.

We are also continuing progress on projects funded by the 2005 and 2011 SPLOSTs; the 2016 SPLOST recently passed by voters will help pay for several key transportation and facility improvement projects in Kennesaw. These include several significant road projects, stormwater infrastructure improvements, energy and security upgrades to facilities, street and sidewalk resurfacing and repairs, and property acquisition to support economic development, parks, and Smith-Gilbert Gardens. The SPLOST summary can be found on the city website.

We are also taking a good look at the master plan for Depot Park and are making some updates to better suit the city's future needs. Everything we are doing is designed to fit with the livable centers initiative promoting quality growth principles by mixing **live, work, and play options**. We want to create a future downtown with a diversity of homes, shops and offices as well as enhanced streetscapes and sidewalks – the end goal is emphasizing pedestrian-friendliness.

Revival and several other downtown projects are helping move us forward in our long-term goal to become a sustainable, walkable, and connected community.

There are several residential developments, either in progress or planned, that showcase the diversity of ages attracted to living in Kennesaw. We want to be known as a city who serves all – a city with churches, doctors, favorite places you visited from childhood to retirement without having to uproot and relocate. Whether you're a millennial looking for a cool starter apartment, a family seeking a house to grow into, an empty nester looking to downsize, or a senior who wants low maintenance ... there are homes in the city to fit any profile – we have places that will carry you through your life.

Developments addressing the growing demand for active adult housing include the 60 home-Victoria Crossing on Moon Station Road and a single family development in Ridenour which will be designed to take advantage of views made possible by its elevated location and will be known as "the View at Ridenour." This area is located in close proximity to the Fuqua Development, thereby adding support for those businesses.

Industrial development activity also continues to expand. Deerland Enzyme is completing a new probiotics facility this spring. RedX medical will be starting construction on a new operation by late

spring. Georgia Western is building a new facility on McCollum, and McNeal Professionals is developing a new facility on Ben King Road.

These businesses will add 80-100 new jobs – all of which can provide a very educated workforce due to our proximity and growing relationship with KSU, the third largest university in the state and growing!

Sustained and controlled economic development requires teamwork. We are working with our development authorities to fill vacant commercial spaces and recruit new businesses to our community. We are committed to increasing ongoing dialogue with business owners and developers and will work to facilitate business roundtables to discuss pertinent issues that affect all of us.

The progress we have made is only possible with the involvement of all of you, and together, we will set goals and make plans for programs and projects that are mutually beneficial.

New development is certainly creating value, but we do not want to leave behind more established aspects of our city. Kennesaw has some excellent subdivisions, but there are also some older neighborhoods that are experiencing declining value because of neglect or disrepair of abandoned or foreclosed properties or those with absentee owners who have turned the homes into rental properties.

The Tara neighborhood is serving as a model for how city departments and residents can take on the challenge of revitalizing their area. A combination of tactics has been identified, including forming a leadership group to plan activities, schedule cleanup days, and stepping up code enforcement activities to pressure violators to take action. A volunteer even agreed to publish a newsletter to keep everyone informed. This Tara initiative is linked to plans to revitalize the Cherokee Street corridor – all the connections are working together to create value.

In addition to encouraging neighborhood action and involvement, the city has invested in capital improvements to make neighborhoods more attractive, such as street improvements, upgrading stormwater infrastructure for better drainage, and improving trails and local playgrounds.

Replacing old playground equipment in some of our pocket parks provides a safe place for kids to play and makes a big difference for families in those areas.

Let's talk about a \$1,000,000 infrastructure project in Woodland Acres installing curbs and gutters using federal community development block grant money. This project has been ongoing for several years.

By making it a safer and more enjoyable place to live, the residents have become engaged in helping to maintain and improve their surroundings, improving lives ...

Another aspect of value creation ... and a fundamental part of building connections and creating value, is assuring people of their personal safety and security. It is very difficult to attract businesses, homeowners, or other investors to cities that are perceived as being unsafe. Here in Kennesaw, we are blessed to have

an outstanding group of law enforcement and 911 communications professionals who protect public security, 24/7.

The Kennesaw Police Department is committed to delivering the highest level of public safety services that strengthen crime prevention and control, encourage interagency cooperation and coordination, and increase community confidence in law enforcement. A key measure of their success is their re-accreditation by the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies or CALEA. To earn re-accreditation, the department must undergo a CALEA assessment every three years, where evaluators examine all aspects of the department's policies, procedures, management, and operations to ensure compliance with 480 applicable standards. In November, KPD was awarded accreditation for the third time. What's more, Kennesaw is continually named one of the safest cities in the state.

In order to provide effective law enforcement, police forces require the right equipment ... and KPD made equipment purchases a priority. The department budgeted for and purchased several new vehicles, including a specialized canine unit.

In a pro-active move to ensure preparedness for any situation, they purchased "go-bags" to be used in active shooter situations. They also took the step of upgrading to new radios to keep Kennesaw police compatible with all Cobb County jurisdictions.

As important as equipment and specialized training is to the success of any law enforcement agency, so is the support of the community they serve. Chief Westenberger and his staff have created a supportive relationship through visibility and accessibility. You see the chief everywhere; he is at every event ... he is among the people ... visible and accessible ... and he has even been seen singing along with the "Journey tribute band."

Many of our officers live right here and participate as engaged members of our city too. They are raising their families here – they know the community in a more personal way.

Also serving the community is the Kennesaw-Acworth 911 center. Under the direction of newly appointed director, Linda Davis, the 911 Center will benefit from innovative upgrades to its phone system giving wireless customers in Kennesaw and Cobb County the ability to send a text message to 911 for emergency help. Text to 911 is an enhancement which can be very valuable for hearing/voice impaired callers, or if a medical emergency renders someone incapable of speech, or when speaking out loud would put the caller in danger. The 911 Center is also in the process of preparing for their own CALEA accreditation.

What does 2016 promise ...

While our focus is on the areas just discussed – financial stability, development initiatives, neighborhood improvements, and public safety – our team also continues to deliver on all the things that make

Kennesaw unique. Our parks and recreation department is recognized as one of the best in the state, bringing us programs, activities, events, and facilities that are second to none.

The southern museum, in affiliation with the Smithsonian Institution, offers quality exhibits with local significance such as the recent *Seeking Justice* exhibit detailing the story of the Leo Frank case.

Smith-Gilbert Gardens adds more accolades too, earning regional acclaim as a destination location for their unique bonsai display, and they are expanding!

But let us not forget that everything we have accomplished took the help and support of a whole lot of people and a whole lot of dedication.

The members of the city's various boards, authorities, and commissions create a tremendous amount of added value for our city. We work together and share common goals and objectives that enable us to accomplish great things. We also would not be successful without partnerships with many organizations. The KBA, Cobb Chamber, Cobb Travel, the Cobb Sports Alliance, Cobb Development Authority, the Cobb Board of Education, other Cobb municipalities, Kennesaw State University, the ARC, and various state and federal agencies all partner with us and help us accomplish more than we could ever do alone.

We look forward to exploring opportunities to share services and increase efficiency on both ends of the relationship. I sincerely thank the representatives from all of these organizations attending today and ask they stand and be recognized.

It has been said that training and education mean nothing if you do not have the gumption to act ...

We are blessed to have a staff of outstanding professionals led by city manager, Jeff Drobney, who skillfully take care of our day-to-day business. The quality and competence of these people is demonstrated by the awards and recognitions they earned this past year. Those include accreditation of the building services department by the International Code Council; the Georgia Planning Association award to economic development and planning & zoning group recognizing their outstanding planning process; the TripAdvisor Certificate of Excellence for Swift-Cantrell Park as one of the best parks in Georgia; and the Academy of Interactive and Visual Arts silver award for creative excellence on the web. There are numerous individuals pursuing their educations by enrolling in undergraduate, masters, and even doctorate level programs.

The positive growth and success of our city is largely because of these people and I wish there was time to thank every one of them individually. Would you all stand together and receive our thanks?

Last but by no means least, I want to introduce the members of the 2016 City Council who will be providing policy direction and participate in establishing goals and setting priorities for our city government. They are Yvette Daniel, Jimmy Dickens, Doc Eaton, and Jim Sebastian. We ask for your support, your prayers, and patience as we learn our roles and how we can best contribute.

Council Post 3 is currently vacant, but a special election in may will determine the new representative. I hope you will make the effort to learn about the candidates and cast your vote.

In closing I give you this ... as many of you know, I served on submarines in the United States Navy. Running a city is similar to driving a submarine.

In front of the ship's control party is a gray-steel cabinet filled with more than two dozen gauges, switches, monitors, and a compass. The helmsman sits inboard and is responsible for maintaining the ordered course. To his left is the planesman who is responsible for attitude, or the angle of the ship – a positive “up bubble” is preferred. And further left is the chief of the watch who responds to direction from the diving officer to control ballast systems. The diving officer sits behind and in-between the helmsman and planesman, and is responsible for the overall ship handling quality and monitoring of the ship control panel— each of these positions is reliant upon the other to be successful – with each lending his own special training and skills.

Everyone onboard knows what direction we are heading (forward) but we do not know what is in front of us ... we cannot see what lies beneath the seas ahead, nor can we predict what obstacles may drift into our course. Tides, currents, and steerage errors can cause the ship to be slightly off-course. Occasionally, the ship will climb to periscope depth and retrieve satellite data to confirm its location in the world. If necessary, minor adjustments are made to get us get us back on course.

In this environment we have learned to trust each other, to complete the individual task assigned. If each of us does our job to the best of our ability, we will arrive on station and perform our mission safely and successfully. Each sailor acknowledges his job is important, part of something bigger than himself, part of something that will have consequences and outcome for all.

It's truly an example of team effort for team benefit – it all adds up to building trust and confidence in ourselves and in each other to perform at our best, day in, and day out, determined to be part of a winning team.

And this is also how we run a successful business, an organization like KBA or a city ...

I look forward to continuing to build the connections that create value for every resident, business, and visitor to our great city. I look forward to earning your trust and confidence in the days ahead and being part of a winning team.

Thank you for your time and attention.